

OMAN 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion and declares sharia is the basis for legislation. It protects the right of individuals to practice other religions as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.”

According to the Basic Law, the Sultan must be a Muslim, and the Crown Prince must be a Muslim and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents. According to the law, offending Islam or any other Abrahamic religion is a criminal offense.

There is no provision of the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief. Proselytizing in public is illegal. All religious organizations must register with the government.

In June, a court sentenced two citizens to three and five years in prison, respectively, for online comments the government viewed as denigrating Islamic values. They were arrested in 2021, on allegations of making blasphemous statements online. Two other citizens were arrested at the same time on similar charges; one was acquitted and released, while the other’s case was transferred to a special court. The Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs (MERA) continued to monitor sermons and distribute approved texts for all imams. Religious groups reported that government criteria for registration became clearer in practice, although there were no published rules or regulations for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval. Some nonregistered groups, such as the Church of Jesus Christ, reported progress toward securing registration and permanent places of worship. Non-Muslim groups stated they were able to worship freely in private homes and government-approved houses of worship, although they requested more space to ease overcrowding concerns. A MERA official stated the government planned to build a shared, all-purpose meeting hall for use by minority religious groups but gave no timetable for the project. MERA continued to require religious groups to request approval before publishing or importing religious texts or disseminating religious publications outside their

membership, although the ministry did not review all imported religious material. At a government-hosted day-long event marking the International Day for Tolerance on November 13, the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs stated the country was committed to peaceful coexistence, an interfaith panel discussed embracing religious diversity, and exhibits featured words of tolerance and acceptance from members of religious groups in the country.

In its World Watch List report, Christian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Open Doors said the situation for Christians had improved in the country but converts to Christianity faced pressure from their families and, more widely, from society to renounce their faith.

The Ambassador and U.S. embassy officers met with government officials throughout the year to discuss support for freedom of religion and the needs of religious minority groups, including a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship. The Ambassador met with the Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs in August to convey U.S. support for religious freedom and to raise concern about convictions and prison sentences for blasphemy. The Ambassador and embassy officers also met regularly with religious minority leaders and faith-based community members to discuss the needs and support the worship practices of all religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.8 million (midyear 2022). The government's National Center for Statistics and Information estimates the population at 4.9 million, with citizens constituting approximately 59 percent of the population and foreign workers approximately 41 percent. The government does not publish statistics on the percentages of citizens who practice Ibadhi, Sunni, and Shia Islam. The U.S. government estimates the population to be 95 percent Muslim; 45 percent Sunni, 45 percent Ibadhi, and 5 percent Shia. Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians combined comprise the remaining 5 percent; almost all are foreign workers.

Academic sources state most non-Muslims are foreign workers from South Asia. Noncitizen religious groups include Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Baha'is, and Christians. Christians are centered in the major urban areas of Muscat, Sohar, and Salalah, and include Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and Protestants. There is no remaining indigenous Jewish population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The Basic Law declares Islam to be the state religion and declares sharia is the basis for legislation. It protects the right of individuals to practice other religions as long as doing so does not “disrupt public order or contradict morals.” The Basic Law prohibits discrimination based on religion. According to the Basic Law, the Sultan must be a Muslim, and the Crown Prince must be a Muslim and a legitimate son of Omani Muslim parents.

There is no provision in the law specifically addressing apostasy, conversion, or renunciation of religious belief.

The penal code sets the maximum prison sentence for “insulting the Quran,” “offending Islam or any [Abrahamic] religion,” or “promoting religious and sectarian tensions” at 10 years. The law also penalizes anyone who, without obtaining prior permission, “forms, funds, [or] organizes a group...with the aim of undermining Islam...or advocating other religions” with up to seven years’ imprisonment. Holding a meeting outside government-approved locations to promote another religious group is also criminalized with a maximum sentence of three years in prison. The law allows authorities to prosecute individuals for any message sent via any medium that “violates public order and morals.” Using the internet in a way that “might prejudice public order or religious values” is a crime

that carries a penalty of between one month and one year in prison and a fine of not less than 1,000 rials (\$2,600).

All organizations, including religious groups, must register with the government. The law does not specify rules, regulations, or criteria for gaining ministerial approval. Groups seeking registration must request meeting and worship space from one of the sponsor organizations recognized by MERA. New, non-Muslim religious groups unaffiliated with a previously recognized sponsor must gain approval from MERA before they may register. Muslim groups must register, but the government – as the benefactor of the country’s mosques – serves as their sponsor. MERA must also grant its approval for new Muslim groups to form. For non-Muslim groups, the ministry recognizes the Protestant Church of Oman (a partnership between the Reformed Church of America and the Anglican Church), the Catholic Church in Oman, the al-Amana Center (an interdenominational organization affiliated with the Reformed Church of America), the Hindu Mahajan Temple, and the Anwar al-Ghubaira Trading Company in Muscat (Sikh) as official sponsors. The sponsors are responsible for recording and submitting to the ministry a statement of the group’s religious beliefs and the names of its leaders.

All individuals who deliver sermons in recognized religious groups must register with MERA. The licensing process for imams prohibits unlicensed lay members from preaching sermons in mosques, and licensed imams must deliver sermons within “politically and socially acceptable” parameters. Lay members of non-Muslim groups may lead prayers if they are specified as leaders in their group’s registration application.

The law restricts collective worship by non-Muslim groups to houses of worship on land specifically donated by the government for the purpose of collective worship.

The law prohibits public proselytizing by all religious groups, although the government authorizes certain “Islamic propagation centers.”

The law states the government must approve the construction or leasing of buildings by religious groups. In addition, new mosques must be built at least one kilometer (0.6 miles) from existing mosques.

Islamic studies are mandatory for Muslim students in public schools from kindergarten through 12th grade. Non-Muslim students are exempt from this requirement if they notify school administrators that they do not wish to attend such instruction. The classes take a historical perspective on the evolution of Islamic religious thinking and teachers are prohibited from proselytizing or favoring one Islamic group over another. Many private schools provide alternative religious studies courses.

The Basic Law states sharia is the basis for legislation. Principles of sharia inform the civil, commercial, and criminal codes, but there are no sharia courts. Civil courts adjudicate cases according to the nonsectarian civil code. The law states that Shia Muslims, whose jurisprudence in these matters differs from that of Sunni and Ibadhi Muslims, may resolve family and personal status cases according to Shia jurisprudence outside the courts, and they retain the right to transfer their cases to civil courts if they cannot find a resolution within the Shia religious tradition. The law allows non-Muslims to seek adjudication of matters pertaining to family or personal status under the religious laws of their faith or under civil law. According to the law, a mother may lose custody of a child after the child turns seven if the father is Muslim and she is not.

Citizens may sue the government for abuses of their right to practice religious rites that do not disrupt public order; there have been no known cases of anyone pursuing this course in court.

Birth certificates issued by the government record an individual's religion. Other official identity documents do not do so.

Foreigners on tourist visas who are not clergy may not preach, teach, or lead worship, even privately, unless they are sponsored by a recognized religious

group, register with MERA, and receive a government permit. Visa regulations permit foreign clergy to enter the country to teach or lead worship under the sponsorship of registered religious groups, which must apply to MERA for approval before the visiting clergy member enters the country.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In July 2021, security forces arrested internet activist Ghaith al-Shibli and three other participants in online dialogues that Shibli organized on religious freedom and other topics that were seen by the government as denigrating Muslim values. On June 7, a court acquitted Shibli, transferred the case of another participant to a special court, and sentenced the two other participants, Maryam al-Nuaimi and Abdullah Hassan, to three years and five years in prison, respectively, for comments deemed insulting to Islam.

According to religious leaders, MERA continued to monitor sermons at mosques to ensure imams did not discuss political topics. The government required all imams, regardless of their branch of Islam, to preach sermons within what the government considered politically and socially acceptable parameters. These parameters, which the government outlined monthly, included the distribution of a list of acceptable topics along with standardized and approved Friday sermons for Ibadhi and Sunni imams. Mosques under the purview of the Diwan (Royal Court), such as the Grand Mosque in Muscat, were not subject to this monitoring. There were no reports of non-Muslim sermons being monitored.

While no published rules, regulations, or criteria existed for new religious groups to receive ministerial approval, religious groups said MERA considered criteria such as a group's size, theology, belief system, leadership structure, and the availability of other worship opportunities before granting registration. MERA reportedly employed the same criteria whether the group was Muslim or non-

Muslim. Religious groups said MERA consulted with existing religious communities before ruling on the application of a new religious group. According to MERA, there was no limit on the number of religious groups it could register. Representatives of some religious groups said that MERA officials communicated frequently with them to help navigate the process of obtaining property for religious facilities and to clarify the legal provisions governing religious practices.

Some religious communities remained without a registration sponsor or permanent place of worship, while others reported some progress, including the Church of Jesus Christ. MERA was working with the Church of Jesus Christ, the Sikh community, and other groups to identify suitable, permanent places of worship, a MERA official stated. Other religious minority groups, such as the Buddhist community, reported they remained without permanent and independent places of worship as recognized groups even though they represented a significant population in the country, primarily of expatriate workers. The Sri Lankan embassy continued to host Buddhist religious services and ceremonies on its compound. Other minority Christian groups without a permanent place of worship used the Protestant Church of Oman's facilities or met in private homes. MERA informally continued to approve of this arrangement.

Non-Muslims who worshipped in private homes continued to say the government generally did not interfere with Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious groups in their regular worship services despite continuing legal prohibitions on worship outside of government-approved locations.

Some non-Muslim minority groups that met outside of private homes continued to report overcrowding at their places of worship and said that they requested more space to ease overcrowding concerns. According to some religious leaders, space limitations also caused overcrowding for some non-Muslim groups that met in private homes. Some religious communities worshiped via virtual meetings or met in reduced numbers due to COVID-19 safety measures in effect at the beginning of the year. This practice temporarily eased space limitations until the

government lifted all COVID-19 restrictions in May. A MERA official stated the ministry was willing to work with other government ministries to secure additional, government-approved land to relieve the overcrowding that some minority groups experienced, and the government planned to build a shared, all-purpose meeting hall for use by minority religious groups. The official did not announce a timetable for this project.

MERA approved religious celebrations for non-Muslim groups in commercial or public areas on a case-by-case basis as pandemic-related restrictions eased. For example, Hindu groups hosted Diwali celebrations in October, which they coordinated with MERA.

Authorities continued to block the importation of certain publications, including religious texts, without the necessary permit. Shipping companies said customs officials sometimes confiscated these materials. There were no reports of customs officials confiscating personal religious materials from travelers entering the country. The government also continued to require religious groups to notify MERA before importing religious materials and to submit a copy of the material to MERA. Religious minority leaders continued to say the ministry did not review all imported religious material for approval, and non-Muslims were often able to import literature without government scrutiny. Religious groups continued to say they continued to need MERA approval to publish texts in the country or disseminate religious publications outside their membership, in accordance with the government's policy mandating prior review of published religious material. Religious groups stated they did not attempt to share material with the public outside their places of worship.

The government provided land for all approved religious groups to build and maintain religious facilities in the country. Christian community leaders and MERA said that they were coordinating to establish a second Christian cemetery, since the first was reaching capacity. Christian community leaders indicated that MERA officials supported their efforts to find a location that met their needs; however, MERA officials stated that some Christian community leaders did not

approve of the cemetery site the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning identified for them and continued to discuss a suitable location.

According to members of the legal community, judges often considered the religious affiliation of parents during custody hearings.

The government continued to fund the salaries of some Ibadhi and Sunni imams, but Shia or non-Muslim religious leaders were privately funded.

The government-appointed Grand Mufti, Ahmad al-Khalili, the senior Ibadhi cleric in the country, remained the only cleric able to speak publicly outside the designated government parameters. In a social media statement posted on August 6, he stated that confrontations at that time in Gaza and other Palestinian territories were a “brutal aggression,” and condemned them as a “blatant crime,” calling on “the entire Islamic nation to stand with all force in the face of the aggressor Zionist entity.” Government officials made clear the Grand Mufti did not represent the government’s views.

The government, through MERA, confirmed that it had discontinued *al-Tafahum* (Understanding), a quarterly periodical whose purpose, according to the government, was to broaden dialogue within Islam and promote respectful discussion with other faiths. The government said the periodical was discontinued due to budget cuts and restructuring.

MERA hosted a day-long event marking the International Day for Tolerance on November 13, in coordination with the Ministry of Information. At the opening, Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs Mohammed bin Said al-Maamari said the country was committed to peaceful coexistence, and an interfaith panel later discussed moving beyond mere religious tolerance to embracing religious diversity. The event also featured the informational exhibitions, “Message of Islam from Oman” and “Message of Peace from Oman to the World,” which featured words of tolerance and acceptance from members of religious groups in the country.

According to religious minority leaders, the Royal Oman Police continued to collect religious affiliation information from expatriates applying for work visas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In its *World Watch List* report, Christian NGO Open Doors said the situation for Christians had improved in the country but converts to Christianity faced pressure from their families and, more widely, from society to renounce their faith. The NGO said converts risked being expelled from the family home, being disinherited, and in some cases losing their jobs. Married converts may struggle to see their children and find themselves on the losing side of a custody battle, according to the NGO.

The interfaith al-Amana Center, which was founded and is supported by the Reformed Church in America, a Protestant denomination, continued to sponsor programs to promote interreligious dialogue and understanding between Christians and Muslims. The Center hosted programs in conjunction with MERA to introduce Islam to Protestant seminary students from different denominations and worked closely with MERA to promote interfaith dialogue.

The *Fak Kurba* (Redeeming Anguish) initiative by the Omani Lawyers Association (OLA) continued to focus on the release of prisoners jailed for noncriminal offenses, including unpaid debts. An association official said *Fak Kurba's* supporters were motivated by Islamic humanitarian principles, and the group conducted fundraising during Ramadan to free prisoners by Eid al-Fitr.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador met with Minister of Endowments and Religious Affairs al-Maamari on numerous occasions to convey U.S. support for religious freedom and to raise concerns about the convictions and prison sentences for online blasphemy. Embassy officers met with MERA officials throughout the year to

encourage the government to continue its efforts to support the worship practices of all religious groups. Embassy officers encouraged MERA to find a solution for religious groups seeking officially sanctioned space for worship. To underscore the U.S. commitment to religious freedom, the Ambassador and embassy officials attended MERA-hosted events marking the International Day for Tolerance in November and participated in sessions on shared values, diversity, and the roles of women and youth in promoting tolerance.

The Ambassador and embassy officers also met with religious minority leaders and faith-based groups to discuss the needs of their groups and the challenges they faced because of COVID-19 restrictions, which were lifted in May. Embassy officers attended religious celebrations to support religious freedom, including Diwali in October.

In June, the embassy posted a video message on social media promoting tolerance and diversity, exemplified by Americans of diverse backgrounds who come together and respect various holiday traditions in the United States. Throughout the year, the embassy also highlighted internal events that promoted tolerance, freedom, and religious understanding.